

A Translation Technique

by Jacqueline Eadie

Following the theme of TESOL Arabia's 1997 International Conference—Tradition and Innovation—this article encourages readers to look at traditional translation activities in a positive and innovative light. A detailed lesson plan is offered, showing how back-translation (into L1 and then back into L2) (Rose 1985) can be exploited with a monolingual class, whether or not the teacher speaks the students' mother tongue.

Traditionally, the translation method was used to teach language as a subject, primarily involving the manipulation of grammatical form (Howatt 1984). In recent times, EFL teachers have slowly been reviving the use of translation to present vocabulary (Butera 1991; Heltai 1989) and concept checks (Harmer 1991). Edge (1986) and Thomas (1984) have reported on using whole text translation at advanced levels. Atkinson's (1987) assertion that "the gap in the methodological literature is presumably partially responsible for the uneasiness which many teachers feel about using or permitting the use of the students' native language" would seem to continue to hold true today. Because of the very obvious dangers associated with excessive dependency on the mother tongue (Atkinson 1987), one might argue that teachers would benefit from more methodological guidance which clearly delimits the functions for which the mother tongue is appropriate.

Over and above concept checking and vocabulary explanations, it is entirely possible to view translation itself as a relatively communicative activity in which language can be practised at all levels within a meaningful context. Duff (1989:51) stresses that the crucial point about using translation is to retain the context. He recommends the use of mother-tongue exercises whose object is effectively to help students understand that what works in their mother tongue may not work in English. Authors on the subject of translation generally agree that consciousness-raising (the raising of learners' awareness of grammatical features without directly instilling the rules—see Rutherford 1987) is more important than saving time.

Atkinson's *Teaching Monolingual Classes* (1993) includes an excellent chapter on translation and gives a brief lesson plan on comparing student translations. His idea is extended in this paper by the use of a framework to guide the very challenging step of "comparing" different language versions and to help teachers who are unfamiliar with their students' mother tongue.

At the United Arab Emirates University, initial experiments at using a simple translation plan proved frustrating because, in the Gulf, learner expectations are traditionally oriented toward the teacher's role as "judge." Clearly, this is an impossible approach where the teacher has only a minimal knowledge of Arabic (as is the case of the author). Moreover, the teacher's hopes that students would be able to view alternate versions as equally acceptable were not met. Because many first year students at the UAE University General Requirements Unit have trouble thinking critically (MacLean 1997) and are hesitant to follow their own conclusions, they often want the "right" answer directly from the teacher. It soon became clear that for back-translation to work at all in this teaching situation, students would benefit from more guidance and a breakdown of the

stages involved. The resulting lesson plan is presented and explained below. The aim is to show that translation can be communicative, intellectually challenging, and fun for the whole class.

Stage	Teacher Focus	Student Focus	Stage Aim
preparation	select two equivalent versions (A & B) of a challenging short text (consecutive paragraphs, verses of poem etc.		
	prepare 4-column charts for students plus OHT		
warm-up	introduce the topic area without preteaching vocabulary	discuss the topic	to stimulate schema
explanation of aims	introduce translation activity, explaining that T is not to use L1 at all but will assist with L2 rephrasing, and stressing that translations will not be graded in any way	ask for clarification if required	to remove St stress and eliminate pressure on T to use any L1
translation into L1	pair Sts, allowing strongest the option to work alone, and ensuring equal numbers of A & B; set a time limit (10-15 min)	translate into L1, using bi-/monolingual dictionaries if desired, and with the weaker of the pair as scribe	to practise reading for detail; to draw on Sts' expertise in L1 to generate versions and build confidence
translation into L2	collect in originals and have Sts exchange A & B versions; discourage consultation with original authors; stress that there is no one correct answer	translate into L2 the text translated by other Ss, with total freedom to restate, reinterpret	to encourage Sts to use what L2 they have to render a version to experiment

Comparison chart

During the first phase, the students draw on reading comprehension skills in order to reach a translation and then write a guided paragraph in L2. In order for this now to become a consciousness-raising activity, most students will need a structured task if the subsequent comparison of the texts is not simply to become a matter of marking things wrong. The following chart has been designed for this purpose. An overhead transparency (OHT) of the chart enables a few examples to be elicited and the class as a whole can advise the teacher where to place the items, according to the criteria of intelligibility and grammar. Examples are included in Appendices II and IV below.

Compare your translation with the original. Find some examples of other ways you translated the words and expressions and decide where to put them in the chart.

Original	Acceptable	Not too bad	Unacceptable

Noticing phase

Stage	Teacher Focus	Student Focus	Stage Aim
presentation of comparison activity	explain that the aim is NOT to look for mistakes but to compare; select examples from texts A & B and enter onto 4-column chart OHT	observe how differences are not necessarily not mistakes	to encourage Sts to accept more than one level of correctness
comparison of different versions	distribute the original A & B texts so Sts can compare with what they have written; circulate and, when asked, help Sts decide acceptability of versions through discussion and explanation	look at some of the differences in the original and translated versions and decide which column to enter on chart (asking the T if unsure)	to focus Sts' attention on items of lexis or structure and involve them in evaluating degree of difference from original
report back	ask each St to select an interesting item and come up to OHP to fill in master chart and explain reasons for the decision; it's better to keep stronger Sts until later as it becomes harder to find examples	1.) explain to the class something you noticed and say why it is acceptable or not and then fill it in on the OHT 2.) listen to the presenter and ask questions or comment as needed	to have Sts responsible for reporting their findings and so provide an opportunity for presenting and listening practice plus whole class discussion
follow-up	copy the OHT for each St to keep	highlight any of the items that you have had difficulty with in the past	to provide a permanent record of achievement and reference

extension	shortly after this lesson hold a "problem clinic" on common errors like those which appear in the NOT TOO BAD column	collect examples of common errors made by the students you study with to bring to a "problem clinic"	to have Sts identify common L2 problems and seek alternatives.
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2. Suitability of the Lesson

To all levels

With intermediate to advanced levels, the teacher may leave the entire comparison stage in the hands of the students and only draw attention to points that have been overlooked during the whole-class reporting. Additionally, with the adaptations mentioned below, this lesson plan can be used with low-level classes. It might even be argued that it has essential advantages for these classes because it introduces the all-important concept of tolerance of more than one correct alternative. With elementary classes, the notion of RIGHT vs. WRONG remains strong and students may not have been introduced to the idea that more than one answer might be correct. Therefore, it may be more helpful to have the students look ONLY at spelling, agreement, and obvious synonyms while the teacher circulates and selects a few translated expressions to present to the class as GOOD, OK or NOT GOOD before individuals are invited to come up and present their findings.

To all teachers

Translation can, of course, be used by teachers who speak the students' L1. These teachers may feel reluctant to use L1 for fear of escalating the use of L1 and therefore reducing exposure to English. With this in mind, it is possible to set down rules such as forbidding the students to ask the teacher to use anything but L2 in answering their questions. Moreover, it is important for the class to understand that the teacher will not be grading the translations so students can and indeed SHOULD be creative in getting around problems without the teacher's help.

One powerful advantage of the approach described is that it permits the teacher who has absolutely no knowledge of the students' L1 to utilize the technique because it is the students who are entirely responsible for the translation and no "marking" of the translation is required. Creative interpretation is the only recourse available. Students who are aware of their teacher's limited knowledge of their language are eager to show (even in very broken English) what they have discovered about common mis-translations as they come to realise that the teacher is as much a learner as anyone in the class. Student presentations can teach us all a great deal about how errors are perceived and how they are explained from the learner's perspective.

For using L1 to improve L2

Teachers who are concerned about too much L1 in the monolingual classroom should state up front that they will not translate anything for the students. Although students, up to intermediate level, will probably discuss the task in their L1, they are likely to remain focused on L2 reading,

writing, and structure throughout. The L1 is used as a valuable resource for remaining on task in the L2. And finally, the reporting stage provides an ideal opportunity for an authentic speaking and listening task in the L2. Most students are very interested in sharing their results. They wish to know whether their own triumphs and mistakes are common to the class. It is quite normal for students to be too harsh on themselves, so the high numbers of items in the "appropriate" and "not too bad" columns generally prove to be a pleasant surprise.

3. But is It Communicative?

Is it Useful?

For those who might feel skeptical as to the levels of communicative language and challenge involved in this type of translation activity, there follows a selection of criteria against which this lesson might be rated.

Communicative and cognitive features of translation

According to Nunan (1989:132), a good communicative language lesson will

1. Derive input from authentic sources;
2. Involve learners in problem-solving activities in which they are required to negotiate meaning;
3. Incorporate tasks, which relate to learners' real-life communicative needs;
4. Allow learners choices in what, how and when to learn;
5. Allow learners to rehearse, in class, real-world language tasks;
6. Require learners and teachers to adopt a range of roles, and use language in a variety of settings in and out of the classroom;
7. Expose learners to the language as system;
8. Encourage learners to develop skills in learning how to learn;
9. Integrate the four macroskills;
10. Provide controlled practice in enabling microskills; and
11. Involve learners in creative language use.

Oxford (1990) explains that "challenging" language activities are those which have "cognitive depth;" that is to say they draw on a variety of intellectual processes. These are exemplified below, together with links to the lesson plan shown in parentheses:

1. Thinking about both form and meaning (recoding meaning into L2 form);

2. Understanding (recoding content so meaning is consistent with the original text);
3. Reasoning and inferencing (interacting with the text; choosing the appropriate vocabulary and form);
4. Generalising (extracting the gist);
5. Solving problems (circumlocuting and simplifying form);
6. Monitoring output (checking translated version);
7. Evaluating and comparing alternatives (completing the comparison chart); and
8. Deduction (noting patterns).

Communicative and cognitive features of this lesson plan

Referring to Nunan and Oxford's features, the author asserts that back-translation will

1. Allow for any type of input, including authentic sources;
2. Involve learners in problem-solving as they negotiate the meaning of the original text in order to find a suitable translation and as they attempt to encode each others' expressions—encouragement to simplify, paraphrase and guess is most helpful at this stage;
3. Relate to such real-life communicative needs as translating in class for peers, decoding signs and notices in the environment, translating notes and letters for friends and relations, etc.;
4. NOT really allow learners choices in what, how, or when to learn, in that the text is selected and presented by the teacher, who then instructs the students on precisely what they have to do;
5. Allow learners to rehearse such real-world language tasks as asking for explanation and exemplification, evaluating choice of form, presenting information in L2, organizing data, etc.;
6. Require learners to act as experts in L1 and take the responsibility for the final product and the teacher to adopt the role of learner and observer, besides being an informant;
7. Expose learners directly to the contrasting language systems of L1 and L2 as they assess and explain to each other the appropriacy of their translated versions;
8. Encourage the learners to become more tolerant of their "mistakes," gain the confidence to experiment, rely on their own intuitions more, consult their peers, and reduce dependence on asking the teacher for translations;
9. Integrate reading and writing, speaking, and listening;

10. Provide guided practice in reading for gist and for detail, written accuracy, recognizing and using discourse and reference markers, listening for specific information, and oral presentation;
11. Involve learners in creative language use as they attempt to find negations, simplifications, and circumlocutions to render a version; and
12. Utilize all and more of the intellectual processes discussed by Oxford.

A multiplicity of cognitive tasks is clearly involved in this lesson. Their primary value is that they help the learner to develop cognitive strategies, which will subsequently improve his or her ability to learn or remember new information. Thus, translation might naturally be expected to promote vocabulary development and structural pattern recognition (Heltai 1989), as well as improve reading comprehension and writing skills (Hummel 1995). When combined with a total of 10 out of 11 features of Nunan's ideal communicative lesson, this plan starts to look like a powerful addition to any language teacher's repertoire.

Conclusion

There are potential pitfalls to be considered such as the time spent deliberating translation into the mother tongue. A time limit is essential to help regulate this. It is a lesson that depends on cooperation. Students who are not on task during the translation will cause problems when those who are ready to back-translate into English find they have too little material. Teacher monitoring and encouragement are crucial at this time. Very weak students will depend strongly on others and so there is always the temptation for them to simply give up and have partners do the work for them. Assigning such students the role of secretary helps. Following the use of a translation activity, students might be keen to use translation of what the teacher says to help each other. There is a real danger of weak listeners coming to rely on this and losing motivation to listen to the teacher at all. It should be made clear that translation has a place, but not in every class.

The author's experience with this technique has shown that students from a lower-intermediate to an advanced level are generally capable of accomplishing the task with minimal assistance. They enjoy it immensely. This activity is a valuable break from more routine classroom activities; it is highly challenging with real meaning for the learners (Danchev 1982, cited by Harbord 1992). After all, they frequently translate in their heads or to each other whether one wants them to or not!

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Appendix I: Example taken from a lower intermediate level class

A

There are many ways of sending secret messages. An interesting method was used by a Chinese general, called Pingyo, 2000 years ago. Pingyo's army was far from their homeland. Between the soldiers and home there were many enemies. But Pingyo sent letters to his king and the enemy could not read them. He sent them like this:

B

A strong messenger was chosen from the soldiers. His hair was cut off and a letter was written

on his bald head. Then he was dressed as a poor farmer and sent home. His journey lasted many weeks. During this time his hair grew and covered the message. The enemy stopped him many times. He was searched but the letter was not found. When he reached the king's palace his hair was cut off again and the letter was read to the king.

Appendix II: Lexical Choice

Original version	Acceptable	Not too bad	Unacceptable
journey (example)	trip	travel (usually a verb)	picnic
clothes		cloth	
reached	arrived at; returned to	arrived; arrived to	
messenger		reporter	postman; profit; prophet
message	letter	massage	handwriting paper;
method	way		
interesting	important; exciting	enjoyable; funny	enjoyment
strong	brave		strange
enemies			bad guys
king; general	leader		the owner
army	military	group of soldiers	
was not found	disappeared; didn't appear	was/ did not appeared	
homeland	home state; home; country		house
like this:	as following	as follows;	as this:
2000 years ago		before 2000 years	
his journey lasted	his journey took		
bald head		without hair	
his hair grew	his hair got longer	his hair grew up	

Appendix II: (Continued): Passive voice

Original version	Acceptable	Not too bad	Unacceptable
he was dressed as	he wore	he wear the clothes of	he weared him a dress
a letter was written on his bald head	they wrote a letter on his bald head		he bald his head where the messages were written on his head

his hair was cut off	the man cut his hair; his hair was shaved; his hair was cut		
searched him	he was checked	they are looking for	
was chosen	was selected	they looked	
the letter was not found	the letter was not there	the letter was missing; the letter was disappeared	no bodies can found the letter
ways of sending	ways to send	ways of sending	

Appendix III: Example taken from an elementary level class

A

Today I want to talk to you about my home country—The United Arab Emirates. I am going to talk briefly about the following topics: geography, population, government, exports, and traditions. First, where is the UAE? Well, if you look at this map you will see that the country is in the Middle East. It is situated in the southern part of the Arabian Gulf and it shares land borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman. Most of the country is hot, dry desert but there are mountains in the eastern part of the country. The capital is Abu Dhabi. The population is about 2 million. Like the USA, the UAE is a union of separate states. There are seven emirates.

B

My name is Mitsuko Tanaka and I come from Japan. Today I want to tell you something about my country. First, I will talk briefly about the geography and population of Japan. Japan consists of a group of islands in the North Pacific Ocean near to China and Korea. Can you see them on the map? Japan has many mountains and many rivers. As for population, Japan has a lot of people—about 130 million. Now let us look at agriculture. The Japanese grow a lot of rice. They also produce wheat, vegetables, fruit, and tea. Japan has many important industries....

Extract from reading material written for UGRU, UAE University

Appendix IV: Example taken from an elementary level class

Original version	Good	OK	Not good
my home country	my home in the UAE		
I am going to talk		I will speak	
briefly	quickly		
geography	geograph	place	gogrefe
population			oplign
where is the UAE?		wheres find the UAE	
look at this map	see the map		

it is situated			you can find him
the Middle East		east middle	
in the southern part of the Arabian Gulf	in th north of UAE is seas		
it shares borders with SA	in th south of UAE is SA		
most of the country	many areas of UAE		
there are mountains	it consist of mountains		
the population is about 2 million	the population are 2 million		
I come from Japan	I am from Japan		
Today I want to tell you	I toke you today		
my country		my contry	
grow a lot of rice			grow rich
vegetables, fruit		vegetable, fried	
many important industries	many important business		
near to China	nixe to china		
Japan has a lot of people		The Japan is a crowded opligation	
Japan consists of a group of islands		Japan counten many island	
Can you see them on the map?	you can look in the map		

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